What’s Wrong With China’s Universities?

Thorsten Pattberg

Ivy League universities in the West are a magnet for Chinese students, meaning that China’s own elite universities lose out on some of the best talent.

David Y. F. Ho

Chinese students are famed for their diligence and perform well in international comparisons, but China’s universities produce few world-class graduates. Why?
Why Aren’t There More World-Class Universities in China?

By David Y. F. Ho

Respect for education has long been viewed as a characteristic of Chinese society and a hallmark of Confucian culture. That Chinese students consistently perform well in international comparisons of academic aptitude has only underscored that impression, as has the presence of hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studying at elite universities around the world.

So why, asks David Y. F. Ho, are there so many entrenched problems at China’s universities?

WHY HAVEN’T Chinese universities produced more world-class scholars and innovators? My first-hand experiences as a visiting professor in some of the ranking universities in mainland China point to three causes: outmoded methods of teaching, autocratic academic governance and what I call administrative bureaucratism. These adverse factors, not a lack of money, are the stumbling blocks that have frustrated, and will continue to frustrate, attempts to make Chinese institutions of higher learning among the best in the world.

I have been visiting academic institutions in mainland China since 1971 — just before the “ping-pong diplomacy” that led to a thaw in Sino-American relations. So I am a witness to dramatic changes that have taken place in these institutions in response to the political climate within which they operate.

OUTMODED METHODS OF TEACHING

Not long ago I served as a visiting professor at one of the ranking universities in Beijing. I found the students very bright and, given proper guidance from professors, eager to learn. However, there were some serious impediments to learning. Walking around the campus, I noticed many students, especially those in large lecture rooms, dozing off, playing computer games, reading newspapers, doing their own work and so forth, without paying the slightest attention to what the lecturers were saying. The lecturers simply went on talking, oblivious to the inattention.

Consistent with my own observations, students say that such inattention is common in academic institutions throughout China. Many lecturers seem to have adopted a blasé attitude toward the disrespect that they receive from students. In my teaching career of over 40 years, I have never seen such student behavior anywhere else. Neither have I seen the blasé attitude of lecturers toward such behavior elsewhere. Do the lecturers have no self-respect? Apparently, they have not yet learned from the sayings of Chairman Mao:

There are teachers who ramble on and on when they lecture; they should let their students doze off ... Rather than keeping your eyes open and listening to boring lectures, it is better to get some refreshing sleep. You don’t have to listen to nonsense.

So, dozing off in class may have been prevalent for a long time. The overall impression I formed was that the lack of respect and trust between professors and students is mutual and pervasive, symptomatic of the uninspiring, troubled learning environment found in Chinese universities. In large measure, students learn in spite of, not because of, their professors.

All of this defies stereotypes about the deferential Chinese student. Back in 1981, I was invited to teach in a major university in Shanghai. On the first day of lectures, the whole class stood up in unison to salute my entrance. Totally unprepared for such an austere occasion, I was petrified instantaneously. The students seemed as determined as any I have encountered not to participate actively in the learning process. Some informed me quietly that it was considered impolite to ask questions in class. I found out that students also have serious misgivings about boring classes. In many ways, the university reminded me of a shishu (private school) in the feudal past. What in the world has the docile, obedient and deferential Chinese student become?

AUTOCRATIC ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE

I must temper this bleak description with more empathy for both teachers and students, who feel helpless in the face of the autocratic and bureaucratic environment within which they function. Administrative governance is typically politicized, paternalistic and autocratic, given the concentration of authority in the “leader” (heads of departments, for example) at different levels. The leaders don’t lead; they issue edicts. Nothing gets done without a nod from the leader. There is little to constrain leaders from practicing “management by terror.” Once I mentioned to a department head that students were afraid of him. His reply was, “That’s good. I want students to be fearful of me, so they will be more obedient.” I was taken aback — especially because the head in question professed to be an expert in management.

Factionalism and territoriality are rampant. If the leader doesn’t like you, you may find your self being ostracized. It is not personal. The colleagues who shun your company simply want to avoid displeasing the leader. This is called “drawing the line,” reminiscent of past political campaigns during which even family members had to “draw the line” for self-protection.

The classroom is highly controlled, marked by unidirectional communication from the teacher to students. Such a controlled atmosphere is not confined to the classroom. Typically, during an academic or professional forum, the chairman, who is more likely male, would begin by setting the tone and defining the parameters of the ensuing discussion. The vice-chairman, if present, would be the next to speak. After that, others would take turns to speak, according to an implicit order of authority or status. Participants who occupy a low status speak little or keep silent. Toward the end, the chairman would summarize the main points and conclusions, if there were any, of the discussion. Clearly, the right to voice an opinion correlates closely with authority ranking.

What teachers and students say in the classroom also may be monitored, especially during periods of political sensitivity. So the strategy for survival is: “Don’t think, just teach” for teachers; and “Don’t question, just study” for students. Understandably, the need to adopt such a strategy is more acute in the social than in the physical sciences. It must also be added that, over the past several decades, the trend toward more freedom of thought is unmistakable.
In Focus: Ho

Academics are supposed to be served by administrators. In mainland China, however, the administrative bureaucratic structure gets in the way of academic excellence. In the university in Beijing where I taught, administrators behave like overlords toward heads of academic departments, who tend to function, sadly, more like bureaucrats than academics. In one department, the construction of a research laboratory was held up for well over a year because of bureaucratic bungling, to the chagrin of researchers eager to get on with their work. The department head told me he had to “beg” (his exact word) the bureaucratic overlords to get things done.

Among the main symptoms of bureaucratism are the following:

- Excessive compartmentalization: Each bureaucrat is responsible for only a narrowly defined task; conversely, this task is to be performed by only a designated bureaucrat. Thus, to get something done, you might have to approach several bureaucrats, one after another, for different steps in the process. Each of these bureaucrats may be jealously guarding his tiny kingdom of influence. So at each step, you might be out of luck if you encounter a mean bureaucrat designated to perform the task required.

- Uneven distribution of workload: Competent and diligent workers are severely punished; they end up having to carry a much heavier workload than do their incompetent or indolent coworkers. So it is common to see some working like dogs, while others in the same administrative unit sit idly by.

- Inadequate communication between or within administrative units: Bureaucrats in mainland China typically do not respond to messages promptly. So you should be prepared to exercise extreme patience because, administratively speaking, the left hand may not know what the right hand is doing.

- Inadequate or no follow-up: Doing what one says one will do is not a common virtue found among bureaucrats. So you may expect more delays and waste of time.

Bureaucracy lays waste to the potential for academic excellence by eating into precious time that academics need to do their work. Here are just a couple of the numerous instances of rampant bureaucracy I encountered. After having been in a university for one month, I was still unable to enter the library because of miscommunication between the department and the library. I once spent a whole morning to open a bank account into which payments could be deposited, as instructed by a bureaucrat, only to be informed the next day that I had to open a different account for the same purpose.

CONCLUSION

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese universities have gone through dramatic changes that mirror changes in the wider society. The introduction of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of gāngé kāifāng — literally “change, reform, open up” — accelerated the abandonment of the Soviet model of higher education. Increasingly, Chinese universities look to emulate their counterparts in the West. In preparation for graduate study in Western countries students in prestigious institutions make studying English their top priority. The question is: Why do so many of them start to excel only after they have gone overseas to study?

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